It may be then that our analyses need to be future-facing in such a way that we teach prospective collectors and traders how to pass through university classrooms to depart from the colonial mentalities and discourses that remain alive today. Furthermore, where contemporary collectors still do not, they need to be challenged to describe the objects they collect differently to how their predecessors did: they must contextualize the works with details such as names of artists, places of creation and collection, and circumstances under which the works are collected. Such collection practices will then make possible the further attempts of scholarship to fill out our knowledge of the quotidian contexts of the works. In time, then, new categorizations will emerge that are not as epistemically violent and offensive as the “tribal” categorizations away from which we are attempting to move. Much work still remains to be done along the vectors Gagliardi and Biro signal.

References cited

So, What Do We Do Now?
Susan Elizabeth Gagliardi, Associate Professor, Art History, Emory University
Yaille Biro, Associate Curator for the Arts of Africa, Metropolitan Museum of Art
On “More Truth,” the May 27, 2020 episode of the Scene on Radio podcast from Duke University’s Center for Documentary Studies, independent journalist Lewis Raven Wallace asks, “Shedding light is only part of the struggle [to seek truth], right?” explaining, “it matters how we shine that light. … [A particular] telling can reinforce the status quo or challenge it, depending on the framing.” He concludes that we need to attend to how we present information if we care about the meanings and possibilities attached to the stories we tell. While Wallace’s statements specifically address an urgent need for a long overdue reckoning with racial prejudice against Black, Indigenous, and other people of color in the United States, they resonate with us and the discussion we brought forward in our winter 2019 First Word essay, “Beyond Single Stories: Addressing Dynamism, Specificity, and Agency in Arts of Africa.”

Scholars and journalists share professional commitments to search for information, assess its reliability, and present analyses to their audiences. Africanist scholars also often commit to examining or subverting Eurocentric understandings of the world. We endeavor to recover overlooked voices, democratize information, and decenter knowledge. Yet, our tellings about art and its histories may reinforce the status quo or challenge it, depending on the framing.

In our winter 2019 essay, we argue that scholars of African arts must overhaul our language for so-called historical or classical arts of Africa and reframe our presentations of material to disparate audiences. We emphasize a need to acknowledge and investigate bases for the categories we use to organize and think about arts as a starting point, and only as a starting point, for reform. We are concerned with how scholars of African arts write about and present historical or classical arts of Africa in any context, whether in university courses, scholarly monographs, or museum didactics. When scholars rely on terms like Bwa, Fang, Hemba, or Lobi to organize and evaluate objects or conditions surrounding their production and circulation without checking to see if the analyses that follow reinforce outdated concepts at the core of the terms, then we risk reproducing outdated concepts even if we qualify the terms we use.

In two series of responses published in the Dialogue section of African Arts, nine scholars, including emerging and established museum professionals and academics from Africa, Europe, North America, and South America have offered attentive reflections (see African Arts Vol, 53, no. 3 and this issue). We are grateful for their thorough engagement with our text. Joshua Cohen, Maxime de Formanoir, Salia Malé and Marguerite de Sabran, John Warne Monroe, and Leslie Wilson authored the first set of responses. Juliana Ribeiro da Silva Bevilacqua, Claire Bosc-Tiessé, and Mbongiseni Buthelezi contributed their words to this issue. Rich ideas we received from them and other colleagues—as well as renewed attention in recent months to injustice and disparities in the United States and across the world—have further informed our thinking on this topic and prompted a response.

Imagining Authenticity
Imaginings of authenticity have often depended on ideas of bounded cultures untouched by outside influences. Terms used to categorize arts have tacitly reinforced the notions. In their responses to our First Word essay, Wilson, Monroe, Formanoir, Cohen, and Buthelezi separately refer to the African art market and connoisseurship centered in Europe and North America. They point out that the European and North American market as well as connoisseurship linked to it have relied on certain terms to categorize and assess historical or classical arts of Africa.

To this day, when an art dealer, a collector, or another connoisseur evaluates an object and deems it authentic, the designation implies someone values the object within a “one tribe, one style” context (see Kasfir 1984). Importantly, Monroe suggests that people invested in such market-oriented framings of authenticity may often resist calls to reveal historical constructions of ethnonym-based brand names and to expose their fictions (cf. Palmié 2013: 6). Buthelezi and Cohen rightly ask if scholars of African arts should remain beholden to market-driven concerns, especially when we know that such concerns tend to disregard nuanced dynamics of artistic production and circulation on the African continent. We assert that scholars of African arts must pursue critical evaluations of what we and other enthusiasts think we know rather than satisfy expectations of market actors or appeal to them.

Any move to expose the colonial construction of terms linked to present-day cultural or ethnic group names, as well as problematic concepts embedded in the terms through attention to complex entanglements of disparate African and European individuals over time, will unsettle. In the preface to the second edition of her generative book Le Songe de Kafka et autres propos sur la colonie, philosopher Seloua Luste Boulbina (2020: 17) pointedly underlines a core challenge in dealing with knowledge structures inherited from colonial contexts. She explains,

“Today […] if the postimperial “decolonial scientists” have taken over from the “colonial scientists” of the past, they are not necessarily in a position to decolonize knowledge actively because postimperial—and sometimes postcolonial—institutions remain imbued with coloniality.…The epistemic impossibility holds in the fact that we cannot see the branch on which we are sitting.”

The “one tribe, one style” paradigm is difficult to overturn because it is so entrenched. It is the branch on which we sit. And colonial ideas about purity and authenticity are integral to it. Yet, entrenchment of a flawed paradigm does not make the paradigm any more grounded in historical verities. We need to find ways to decouple terms we use from flawed concepts at their core.

There are practical reasons for us to think carefully about our terms, how we use them, and what they mean. As Mbongiseni Buthelezi acknowledges, we may never be able to abandon certain terms entirely even if they reflect flawed concepts because we have come to rely on the terms to organize and search for information. Monroe considers possibilities for harnessing data about historical arts of Africa and advocates for creation of a “globally searchable” database for “large-scale comparative research” across institutions. He also imagines some of the research an open, interconnected database could make possible. As people who have worked on designing or building a database know, the architecture and analytical possibilities of any database depend on the clarity of its structure and the reliability of information added to it. And in order to link databases from different institutions together,
disparate databases must use organizing terms consistently. If we want to realize the computational potential to which Monro points, database designers and builders will need to know what terms including Bwa, Fang, Hemba, or Lobi designate with respect to the objects to which the terms are attached. Database designers and builders will also need to know in what fields to place the terms. A quick look at the visible structure of museum databases in Europe and North America makes clear that not every institution assesses the terms in the same way or places them in the same field. Different institutions variously use the terms to indicate artists' identities or to link objects to particular cultures, populations, regions, or styles. Decisions about the kinds of information about objects the terms capture do not simply reflect attention to clean data entry. They reflect disparate understandings. Scholars of African arts must address these conceptual obstacles if we are going to bring knowledge about and study of historical arts of Africa into the twenty-first century.

Butler urges us to think about the future rather than cling to the past as we update our language. By flagging style-based designations as what they are, namely constructions resulting from histories of individual and collective decisions and exchange at local, national, and international levels, we begin to dispel fantasies attached to designations that have undergirded European and Euroamerican assessments of objects from Africa since at least the end of the nineteenth century. Then as Cohen reminds us, Africanist art historians must engage in “our own thoroughgoing process of critical stockholding.”

As we see it, a critical stockholding of African art history requires careful examination of the foundations of our field that centered on the discernment of discrete styles tied to specific cultural or ethnic groups. The process entails close study of concepts embedded in early twentieth-century approaches to African arts as well as assessment of what the categories have come to mean in different contexts. It is evident that classificatory schema, as problematic as they are, made it possible for scholars to distinguish one object from another and attempt to fill knowledge gaps (cf. Kasfir 1986: 14; Cole 2003: 1).

Some thirty years ago, art historian Suzanne Preston Blier wrote,

> It was the task of Carl Kjersmeier (1935–38), M. Olbrechts (1946), and their followers, Ely Leuzinger (1960), Paul Wingert (1962), and others to develop and promote a system of formal analysis through which one could intelligently separate and systematically evaluate formal qualities of a sculpture … For most African art historians today, this taxonomic system is used because it is there and it has to be accepted (Blier 1988/89: 12, 15).

Blier’s use of the passive voice is revealing. The system, no matter how erroneous it is, exists and will continue to exist. Even if a classificatory system helps us organize objects and knowledge about them, must we accept and even reproduce concepts we know stem from and perpetuate outdated assumptions about the African continent?

As Cohen notes, anthropologists writing in the 1980s and 1990s questioned similar premises undergirding their approaches to the study of peoples and cultures. They sought to reckon with their discipline’s troubled past and moved away from old-fashioned study of peoples and groups. They developed alternate frameworks for analysis and investigated different questions. While initiating similar questioning, scholars of African arts may have had more difficulties than anthropologists in jettisoning outdated paradigms because our field developed around study of certain kinds of tangible objects. As long as we continue to house the objects in museums and consider them as part of our domains of inquiry, then we must grapple with the tenuous concepts used to sort, classify, and study the objects.

We could turn our attention to other types of arts and ask different questions. But as long as we consider ourselves concerned with knowledge about objects in what Juliana Ribeiro da Silva Bevlaçaqua calls “single collections”—a phrase she uses to refer to museum collections dedicated to the canon of historical African arts as Europe and North American art enthusiasts defined the canon throughout the twentieth century—then we must wrestle with how we organize and pursue knowledge about the works. We can continue to question how a canon came into being, why it more or less endures despite its imperfections, and what its limitations are. However, attention to the canon alone will only get us so far. What we also need to do is to want if we wish to address colonial knowledge structures is evacuate outdated concepts bound to works study, including “one-tribe, one-style” imaginings of authenticity.

Lived Experiences

Lived experiences of people who today identify with any particular group and their understandings of that identity or arts linked to it may differ from historical experiences, arts, or understandings. Past and present power contests within and among groups may also shape or be shaped by how people think about their identities and associated images in a particular time and place. Indeed, one of our key concerns is what Formanoir refers to as the “instrumentalization” of identities for political gain. And as we have seen happen in disparate areas of the African continent as elsewhere in the world, ethnic-based identities have at times become weaponized for political gain. People have lost their lives as a result.

In our First Word essay, we refer to Mobutu Sese Seko’s authenticité campaign in former Zaire. Formanoir makes clear the possibility for the politicization of ethnicities and related arts beyond former Zaire through his discussion of a mural on the wall in the Presidential Palace in Gabon. Alternatively, after years of conflict fueled in part by ethnic division, a national institution might prefer to create and promote images of national unity.

In July 2016, the two of us visited the Musée des civilisations de Côte d’Ivoire in Abidjan. We noticed a map of cultural groups pinned to a bulletin board as an explanatory text for museum visitors. Instead of showing dozens of cultural or ethnic groups across the country in a display of the region’s diversity, the map divided the country into just four groups—Akan, Gur, Krou, and Mandé. The text accompanying the map emphasized national unity and shared traits among the four groups in response to political concerns following from years of violent conflicts often tied to people’s perceptions of other people’s identities and allegiances. The conflicts in Côte d’Ivoire brought with them theft of objects from the museum and more significantly, losses of life. Yet, African art enthusiasts more commonly recognize smaller areas encompassed within the four larger regions shown on the map when assigning ethnonym-based labels to arts considered to come from present-day Côte d’Ivoire.

Salia Malé and Marguerite de Sabran as well as Claire Bosc-Tisséy importantly draw attention to how terms used to categorize African arts overlap with names of identities significant to certain individuals and communities in the present. Attention to the historical construction of any term or category, including one tied to a present-day identity that certain people embrace and experience, does not deny the present-day importance of the identity or people for whom the identity is significant. However, the art circumscribed by a particular name and people who identify with or are identified by that name may not have historically overlapped as neatly as our presentations of African arts have suggested.

In a recent op-ed, French anthropologist Jean-Loup Amselle argues against the “fe-morization of categories” at work in the colonial context. He explains,

> In many instances, [colonial knowledge] caused such colonial categories to be themselves reappropriated later on by local social actors…. These ethnic categories did indeed exist in the past, however in a wide polysynomy. But the character of colonial knowledge was to reduce them to a unique meaning.7

A critical stockholding requires careful and nuanced attention to polysynomy as well as changes in the meaning of a term. Categories for art and people may bear the same names, but the repetition of a name does not necessarily mean the categories attached to the name neatly align.
Confront Past and Present Violence to Realize Alternate Futures

Penetrating investigations into the terms we use and their histories allow us to confront past and present violence and to realize alternate futures. Current critical discussions of Blackness, Whiteness, and other expressions of identity within and beyond the United States ask us to rethink histories we have learned and repeated. They urge us to identify and examine specific factors and unequal power dynamics that have produced and reproduced various identity constructions, including ones we may embrace or with which some of us may be identified. The process requires an assessment of how each construction came into being, what each construction has come to mean, and what actual lived experiences of people today identified with any historically constituted group are.

We realize that present-day awareness of an identity does not cancel out a need to situate it within historical perspectives; quite the contrary, we now increasingly face calls to understand identities and symbols attached to them within historical frames. Once we understand better how an identity and its symbols came to coexist in their present forms, we must think about how to develop language to convey more accurately what we do and do not know about them in the present as in the past without reinforcing outdated and prejudiced concepts (See, for example, Hannah-Jones 2019, Biewen and Kumanayika 2017, Biewen and Kumanayika 2020).

Acknowledging clearly what available evidence allows us to know about a single object or an organizing term attached to it and what evidence is missing, as Monroe argues, is another step in the process (see also Vansina 1984). We, like people who responded to our First Word essay, remain committed to finding and foregrounding past and present African agency and epistemologies. A challenge that each of us faces is determining how to recover or at least acknowledge information and insights never captured at the time of an event or shortly thereafter. One approach is to imagine that we can reconstruct a precolonial past. But as Luste Boulbina and Amمسلأ separately caution, if such an approach depends on colonial sources or lingering colonial frameworks, we risk projecting colonial ideas onto the past. We must contend with colonial assumptions lurking in presentations of African arts and not be lured to accept them.

Therefore, another approach is to examine how our sources are intimately bound to colonial and postcolonial experiences even if the sources we consult attempt to craft images of a precolonial past. In addition, we must acknowledge that European colonizers and other foreigners interacted with African artists, dealers, and other community members as they gathered objects and information. How might we identify and highlight often undocumented agencies? Is it possible that African artists, dealers, and other community members observed their foreign audiences as well as produced arts and information about the works with the expectations and desires of their foreign audiences in mind?

Bevlacqua offers specific colonial and postcolonial examples that demonstrate complex dynamics involved in the production of objects. When sculptors outside the Dundo Museum in Angola carved objects, they met the desires of their colonial patrons, who apparently sought “traditional” objects or rather, objects that matched colonial ideas of “traditional” culture. What other kinds of works did the sculptors produce, or what other kinds of works would they have wanted to produce had they not devoted their energies to meeting demands of their foreign clientele? When the sculptors worked in the “Museum Chokwe Village,” might they have had ambivalent feelings about their work, the colonial expectations they confronted, or their own creative ambitions? Even if we cannot answer such questions, could we write an African art history through scholarly publications and museum labels that directly considers such possibilities? It is imperative to realize that we often have as much evidence to assert that an artist created a work with desires of a foreign client in mind as we do to assert that an artist created a work for a particular culture-bound practice. Why should we favor the latter to the exclusion of the former?

We do not see attention to style as a panacea for addressing unequal power structures built into the foundations of the collection and study of historical or classical arts of Africa in Europe and North America. Rather, we see it as one step in a larger effort to investigate sources for our concepts, categories, and language for presenting to our disparate audiences arts of Africa, or more precisely, the canonical objects that form “single collections.” But as Bevlacqua and Bosc-Tiessé remind us, can-based ideas about style do not necessarily align with all arts produced across and beyond the continent at disparate moments in time.

Works that lay at the margins of the canon or beyond it nevertheless deserve attention of Africanist art historians, and style-based designations for such works may reflect different underlying concepts. Works that do not fit neatly within the canon and knowledge about them result from and contribute to particular historical contexts. They require their own frameworks and vocabularies for analysis. Perhaps we as scholars of African arts need to pay more careful attention to subfields within the broader field of African art history, examine distinctive histories of specific areas of inquiry, and continue to resist one-size-fits-all approaches to study of a continent’s arts through all time.

With respect to historical arts of Africa in “single collections,” Wilson advocates for development of “new language” as well as attention to “density and complexity.” Buthelezi emphasizes the importance of new discourses in teaching and collecting to realize “categorizations . . . that are not as episemically violent and offensive” as existing ones. We consider our focus on style as a starting point for language reform because style-based categories reflect ways of knowing constructed through the colonial period. With clearer understanding and acknowledgement of what the categories we use are, how they operate, and how they are rooted in particular histories of power plays and knowledge production, scholars of African arts can endeavor to develop new language and examine questions that demand our attention. As the two of us see it, scholars of African arts can reinforce the status quo, which the collective we generally seems to regard as imprecise and inaccurate, or we can challenge it. What we do and how we do it depends on how we shine light and how we deal with framing.

Notes

This essay was written on July 31, 2020. We appreciate the time, thoughts, and perspectives that a wide range of scholars and other people have shared with us since the two of us first began engaging in conversations related to these topics more than a decade ago. We thank editors of African Arts for recognizing the importance of an extended exchange. We also welcome continued conversations and committed action.


2 We referred to extensive literature concerning African arts and authenticity in our First Word (see note 5). Here we reference Kasfir (1992) again for a critical analysis and offer two further references that illustrate or investigate how notions of authenticity connect with ideas about “purity.” See Guillaume and Munro (1926) for an early definition of the concept of authenticity and its application to the selection of works and Kamer (1974) for a market-driven analysis conforming to a culture-bound view of authenticity.

3 Translation by Yaelle Biro. The original text in French reads, “Aujourd’hui […] s’ils les ‘savants décolonisés’ post-imperiaux ont succédé aux ‘savants coloniaux du passé, ils ne sont pas nécessairement en position de décoloniser activement les savoirs car les institutions post-impérielles—et parfois postcoloniales—demeurent empreintes de colonialité. L’impossibilité épistémique tient au fait qu’on ne peut scier la branche sur laquelle on est assis” (Luste Boulbina 2020: 17).

4 Other Africanist art historians considered similar concerns in the latter half of the twentieth century. In a review of art-historical approaches to the study of African arts and the centrality of style-based approaches, Mommi Adams recognizes the impact of Eurocentric art history on our field. She states, “In the US, emphasis on stylistic analysis (Wingert 1950) was encouraged by the popularity of formalism in studies of modern art, the field most sympathetic to African art. We can understand how scholars of a marginal subject such as sub-Saharan sculpture might choose to work within the dominant intellectual paradigm of style as a strategy to bring their subject into respected status in art history. Style also afforded a unified approach to the diverse sculptural forms confronting them” (1989: 56–57).

5 For a discussion of how culture, politics, and national identity intersected in Côte d’Ivoire at the end of the colonial period, see Minta (2016: 65–71).
of the twentieth century, see J. Vogel 1991.

6 The Musée des civilisations de Côte d’Ivoire (2018) reproduced a version of the map in a book featuring the museum’s collection. It also divided the book into four sections that correspond with the same four areas on the map. In his introduction to the volume, President of Côte d’Ivoire his Excellency Alsssane Ouattara makes explicit a desire for national unity. He writes, “Mon ambition est de faire de la Côte d’Ivoire un pays emparent, une nation réconciliée avec elle-même et avec les autres nations. [...] Reconstituer le pays après la crise qu’il a traversée, rechercher la cohesion sociale pour mieux vivre ensemble, autant de challenges que la Culture s’est essayée à relever avec brio.” Regarding the 2011 looting of the museum in Abidjan, see, for example, Agence France-Presse 2011. Regarding identity-driven violence in Côte d’Ivoire in recent decades, see, for example, Human Rights Watch 2001, 2011.


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